



University of Nebraska at Omaha
DigitalCommons@UNO

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Department of Philosophy

2000

Book Review: *The Man Who Tried to Save the World: The Dangerous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Fred Cuny* by Scott Anderson

Rory J. Conces

University of Nebraska at Omaha, rconces@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/philfacpub>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conces, Rory J., "Book Review: *The Man Who Tried to Save the World: The Dangerous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Fred Cuny* by Scott Anderson" (2000). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 4.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/philfacpub/4>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Book Review: The Man Who Tried to Save the World: The Dangerous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Fred Cuny

Rory J. Conces

Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182-0265

Anderson, Scott. *The Man Who Tried to Save the World: The Dangerous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Fred Cuny*. New York: Doubleday, 1999. 374pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

Occasionally a biography is written about an individual who is "cut" from a different piece of cloth than that of the rest of us. *The Man Who Tried to Save the World: The Dangerous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Fred Cuny* is such a biography. Scott Anderson, a war correspondent who has covered numerous conflicts around the world, tells the story of this most extraordinary humanitarian relief expert. Fred Cuny considered the interests of strangers to be more important than those of his own and eventually gave his life in the pursuit of rendering assistance to those who most needed it. Some readers may have difficulty calling Cuny a hero because he left his son with his parents so that he could satisfy his "higher" calling, but Cuny was an extraordinary man who faced an extraordinary moral dilemma: "Do I stay to watch my son's basketball game, or do I go back out there where people are counting on me, where if I don't go another five, six, one thousand—pick a number—people are going to die?" Although *The Man Who Tried to Save the World* is not a case of hero worship nor a treatise on social justice, it does portray a man who felt deeply about the injustices perpetrated against the poorer peoples of the world and who worked on their behalf. Unlike the writings on justice by theoreticians like John Rawls and Robert Nozick and the conduct by activists like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Anderson's book portrays Fred Cuny as a practitioner—a man of immense practical ability and drive, who possessed a vision of justice and how it should work in the world.

In the Preface, Anderson sets the stage for Parts One, Three, and Four which deal with the background and circumstances surrounding Cuny's disappearance in Chechnya in April 1995. Some of Anderson's narrative is extremely chilling. The author's description of the shelling of Bamut, a small town 11 miles from Grozny and the town in which Cuny was last seen alive, captures the sense of hopelessness and terror that is felt by people caught in such predicaments. What makes this even more troublesome is Anderson's telling pronouncement that the majority of casualties of wars in the latter decades of this century have been civilians (74 percent by the 1980s). Indeed, conflicts like those that took place in Bosnia and Rwanda leave little doubt to this trend.

Parts One, Three, and Four that deal with Cuny's work and disappearance in Chechnya, which constitute the bulk of the book, give a very interesting portrayal of Cuny and the problems of working in war-torn areas such as the Caucasus. Cuny's fateful trip into Ingushetia and Chechnya began in March 1995, fourteen weeks after the conflict between the Russian army and Chechen separatists began. His mission involved a "needs assessment" of the war zone that was requested by the financier and philanthropist George Soros, but expanded to include meetings with senior Chechen rebel commanders and Russian generals in an attempt to arrange a cease-fire so that he could evacuate an estimated 30,000 civilians from the capital city of Grozny. Cuny failed to secure a cease-fire, but Anderson makes it clear why Cuny's success was to be denied in Chechnya, an area that Cuny called "the scariest place I have ever been."

Anderson observes that the conflict in Chechnya had a tremendous impact on Cuny. As noted by someone who worked with Cuny in the field, "he'd [Cuny] always loved people, believed in their intrinsic goodness, but...in Chechnya he saw the mask of civilization slip." Although he was usually optimistic in very difficult situations like those he faced in the Congo and Bosnia, Cuny lost this sense of optimism in the Caucasus. Perhaps Cuny himself lost sight of the three mistakes that he thought a person could make in Chechnya and which capture the sense of peril that was experienced by Cuny. First, "to ever imagine there is a pattern, or logic, to any of it. Instead, this is a land and a war where any terrible thing can happen at any moment, where trying to grasp its full range of lies and treacheries and contradictions strains the limits of the human imagination." Second, "to ever imagine that one side is better—more compassionate, less vicious—than the other. In this war, both sides have committed a stunning array of crimes." Third, "the belief that you can change things, bring an end to the madness, the awful mistake of imagining you might somehow save it." These words find their roots in the history of Chechnya, a history of a fiercely independent people who have since the mid-1700s seized every opportunity to resist any Russian attempt to conquer them. Although the tsarist and Stalinist programs to solve the Chechen problem involved the use of force to scatter the Chechen people across the vast expanses of the Russian empire, the Chechens have always fought to reclaim their homeland. The outcome of the most recent attempt by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to subdue the self-proclaimed Chechen President Dudayev and the Chechen people was a failure, with large numbers

of casualties of both combatants and non-combatants. Anderson's description of the Chechen War and the explanations of its origin make for interesting reading.

The final portion of the book deals with Cuny's March 31 trip into Chechnya with four others as well as the manhunt by an odd collection of governments and agencies to find them after the outside world lost track of them on April 13. Anderson's explanation of the problems experienced by those who seriously searched for the missing group range from the bad timing of trying to focus sufficient attention and resources to the search because of the administration's preoccupation with the April 21 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City to the U.S. policy to support Russia and Boris Yeltsin in the face of a crumbling Soviet empire and the phobia over the Domino Theory being played out in Russia.

Although the bodies of Cuny and the others who disappeared have never been recovered, Anderson concludes that Cuny and his party were executed outside the village of Stari-Atchkoi on April 14. The details of the execution are open to debate. The executions may have been carried out to cover up a theft of a large amount of money from Cuny or to cover up Cuny's knowledge that the abandoned missile base at Bamut housed no SS-4 intermediate range nuclear missiles, knowledge that some Chechen leaders might not have wished to be made public.

Although much of the book deals with Cuny in Chechnya, the more fascinating portion of the book is found in Part 2, which presents not only Cuny's life up to his disappearance, but also a glimpse of Cuny's vision of humanitarian relief. Anderson's presentation provides a fine introduction of this vision for the general reader, though someone with more background in this area may find some of his presentation of Cuny's ideas overly simplistic. The book could have benefitted from greater explanation of the causal relations that Cuny found operating in the world.

There were a number of pivotal moments in Cuny's life that made him fully aware of social injustice in the world and that molded his vision of humanitarian relief. Perhaps the first was his transfer to Texas College of Arts and Industries in Kingston, a city that was sharply divided between the economic have's and have-not's, and his earning a degree in international development from the University of Houston. This was followed by a short assignment with the Federal Model City Program, a program that put him to work in developing the infrastructure of the poor, mostly Hispanic, town of Eagle Pass, Texas. As Anderson points out, the defining feature of Cuny's vision of development and humanitarian aid projects over the coming years had its start in this small Texas town with the need to take into account the wishes of the people the development or humanitarian aid project was designed to help. Without their input, Cuny thought, the aid project would fail to achieve its potential.

A third defining moment came during the Biafra-Nigeria Civil War (1967-70), Cuny's first encounter with the world of disaster relief where he helped coordinate relief shipments to thousands of starving Biafrans. It was here

that Cuny developed a strong sense of justice and the need to actively provide assistance in the face of state sponsored genocide. This was followed by a short stint as a refugee worker in East Pakistan, which was devastated by a cyclone and a civil war. Here Cuny concluded that the disaster relief system was outdated and in need of an overhaul. He perceived too much competition between private groups and government agencies, as well as a basic lack of knowledge about the region and culture, which lead too often to inappropriate aid and the needless death of thousands of people. These defining moments gave direction to Cuny's life, leading him to create his own disaster relief consulting company, Intertect, which had as a goal to radically reconstruct the way disaster relief systems operated throughout the world.

It is from this point on that Cuny became immersed in the natural and wartime disasters that plagued the people of the Third World, especially the poor. The 1972 earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua, lead Cuny to devise improved refugee camp designs to save assistance dollars because they could prevent secondary problems such as outbreaks of infectious diseases and sanitation breakdowns, as well as lessen the feeling of alienation that was a common part of traditional camp life. He found that he could accomplish much of this by simply using single-family tents arranged in a cross-axis, with a common area in the center.

Another devastating earthquake in Central America, the Guatemala earthquake of 1976, prompted Cuny to institute a plan to teach the indigenous population how to build safer structures. These experiences eventually led Cuny to write a four-volume *Relief Operations Guidebook*, which served as a manifesto of his new approach to relief and parts of which most surely can be found in his two published works, *Disasters and Development* (Intertect Press, 1994) and *Famine, Conflict and Response: A Basic Guide* (Kumarian Press, 1999). His approach was not readily accepted by mainstream relief groups partly because it advocated a cheaper way of providing assistance. The cozy arrangements that many USAID workers had when they served overseas were undercut by Cuny's insistence that aid workers live in the field so that they could be closer to needs areas.

As Anderson notes, Cuny moved Intertect away from natural disasters to coping with disasters that were the result of war: El Salvador 1984, Sudan 1984, Horn of Africa 1987, and Sri Lanka 1987. But whatever the focus, Cuny's approach was the same. He transcended the traditional relief worker's role of cleaning up the aftermath of a disaster to one of limiting the effects of the disaster as well as building the infrastructure and societal levels that exceeded the pre-disaster period. As Anderson observes, this approach was indicative of the concept of disaster as opportunity that Cuny had adopted early in his career as a disaster relief specialist. Whether it was a natural disaster or a war-time disaster, Cuny advocated seizing the opportunity of disaster to construct a better place for people to live. Cuny's insights went well beyond improving building practices and dwellings to agrarian reform. This is made clear when Anderson

writes the following: "Once the immediate physical crisis has been dealt with, Fred argued, relief agencies should not be distributing food or medicines or blankets, but rather using their funds to buy up land to redistribute to the poor and landless, and taking advantage of the economic ruptures to help the previously disenfranchised start small businesses." Unfortunately, Anderson may be correct when he says that "Cuny failed to appreciate—or, more likely, had refused to accept—the profoundly ideological considerations that had driven the American government's humanitarian aid policy since the beginning of the Cold War...." The governments of those countries he was working in were less sympathetic with Cuny's humanitarian mission. The path was clear as long as those whom Cuny was serving were on the "right" side, but a tilt to the political left created formidable obstacles, such as the targeting by right-wing death squads of some of the Indians that Cuny taught in Guatemala.

Some of Cuny's bigger projects came in the early 1990s with the civil unrest in Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia. Although some in official circles thought that the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe would lead to an era of peace and cooperation, Cuny saw the unfolding world to be one full of violent possibilities involving nationalist and ethnic strife. It would also be a world full of opportunities for improvement, but more complicated because disaster response would involve a civilian-military-political alliance for it to work in increasingly hostile environments. This became evident in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the massive refugee problem that was created in its aftermath. As Anderson notes, one of Cuny's more momentous tasks culminated the 1991 *Operation Provide Comfort* that moved 400,000 refugees to a military security zone.

This was quickly followed by the 1992 Somalia crisis, a depiction of what can go wrong in a famine situation and what measures could be used to prevent a worsening of the situation. Cuny's ability to assess the situation and to devise means to reduce the loss of life as well as bolster local and national economies is inspiring. In laying out Cuny's ideas, Anderson points out that Cuny was insistent that famines are rarely the result of a massive food shortage, but are due to breakdowns in food distribution, with the devastating result of increasing the cost of food beyond the means of the majority of the people. The typical military response, flooding the stricken area, seemed appropriate, but Cuny noted that it had serious flaws. The number of airdrops re-

quired to serve the needs of those too far from urban centers was extremely imprecise, unreliable, and expensive. Sending massive amounts of outside food aid to fixed feeding centers in major towns would not only undermine the local markets in those areas, but it would have the devastating consequence of taking many farmers away from the fields to seek food in urban centers, thereby making it a food shortage more likely in the following year.

Anderson alludes to Cuny's willingness to publicly accept the use of military force on the behalf of those who are being victimized. This shows up in Cuny's change of heart in advocating the use of force in Somalia, but only under certain conditions. It is reaffirmed by remarks that Cuny made while he was working to install a water purification system in Sarajevo, Bosnia, in 1993. Cuny grew critical of the UN effort and eventually argued for the withdrawal of the UN Protection Force, lifting the arms embargo against the Bosnians, and formulating a blueprint of comprehensive air strikes against Serb forces in Bosnia. Like many things that Cuny did in the field, this radicalizing of his view of humanitarian assistance led many to find Cuny less than neutral in his view of warring parties, which in many official corners played to his disadvantage. Yet Cuny may have been right taking sides in the face of terrible atrocities.

A fine journalist, Anderson illustrates his story with illuminating examples of Cuny's exploits. At times, these examples become tedious, but never dull. It would have been interesting had Anderson explained in greater detail Cuny's approach to humanitarian relief and its radicalization. Despite these shortcomings, I found *The Man Who Tried to Save the World* entertaining and lively reading. It is a splendid book, but one that ends on a disturbing note about Cuny and those who follow his footsteps as humanitarian relief workers: "He had become a living example of his theory of converting chaos into opportunity, finding his moment to shine in the massive upheavals that accompanied the end of the Cold War, but in the end that chaos had taken his life. His death also served as a reminder of a grim new feature of modern war: no one is safe." Readers who deal with the theory and policy of humanitarian relief should seriously consider reading this book to instill in them a sense of realism often absent when they do not come face-to-face with the horrors of war, but yet feel the need to assist the victims that are left in its wake. *The Man Who Tried to Save the World* could well discourage the would-be relief worker from that calling, but it may also add more practitioners to the ranks of those determined to improve the lives of others.